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ABSTRACT

Project Leadership Excellence Achievement and Performance (LEAP) was designed to respond to the needs of gifted students enrolled in secondary schools in rural areas. This paper describes Project LEAP's implementation in four rural Oklahoma high schools with high American Indian enrollments and high percentages of low-income families and limited English proficient students. It demonstrates how the two major overarching outcomes of the project, authentic discovery and rural linkages, provide the framework and foundation for the project's success. Project goals are discussed along with specific indicators of success in the areas of collaboration, identification, curriculum development, and community/parent involvement. The project served over 120 high school students who were not currently identified or served by gifted programs; about 60 percent were Native American. Project LEAP provided students with individualized instruction and specially developed study units that responded to students' assessed strengths and interests and emphasized the language and culture of Native American participants. Project students demonstrated an overall increase in performance on the ACT/SAT scores. Project sites showed statistically significant increases in the number of students applying for college, and no student who applied was denied acceptance to college. Factors influencing the success of the project include authenticity in identification of participants (use of portfolio assessment), linkages between schools and community, superior qualifications of project personnel, and project administration by an interdistrict cooperative. Contains 11 references. (CDS)

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# INCREASING NATIVE AMERICAN INVOLVEMENT IN GIFTED PROGRAMS THROUGH AUTHENTIC DISCOVERY AND RURAL LINAGES

A persistent concern in the field of gifted education is the widespread under-representation of minority students in programs designed to meet the needs of gifted students (Ford & Harris, 1990; Frasier, 1997; Passow & Frasier, 1996). For native American Indian students, the problem has been defined according to a variety of needs: need for appropriate measures (George, 1987), need for cultural responsiveness (Montgomery, 1989) need for appropriate language and relevant cultural characteristics (Peacock, 1979), need to accommodate the predominantly rural nature of schools providing educational options for Indian children and youth (Spicker, Fletcher, Montgomery, and Breard, 1993) and a need to address alternative learning styles (McCarty, Lynch, Wallace & Benally, 1991). Additionally, a critical need for a multicultural curriculum for all gifted students has been identified (Ford, Grantham & Harris, 1996).

## *Project LEAP*

Project Leadership Excellence Achievement and Performance (LEAP) was designed to respond to the needs of gifted students enrolled in secondary schools in rural areas. Its purpose was to identify and serve students who are gifted and limited English proficient, handicapped, minority, culturally diverse, or economically deprived. All students are enrolled in rural residents or geographically isolated. The purpose of the curriculum was to fully develop intellectual, creative, artistic and/or leadership abilities. Project LEAP was designed to serve as a model program for potential replication in rural districts with similar populations throughout Indian country in the United States; therefore, many products have been developed to communicate its intentions, practices and outcomes.

The purpose of this discussion is to describe Project LEAP and demonstrate how the two major overarching outcomes of the project, authentic discovery and rural linkages, provide the framework and foundation for the success of the project. Project goals are discussed with specific indicators of success provided as documented through the evaluation component of the project.

## *Project Description*

Project LEAP is a Javits Gifted and Talented Students' Educational Grant Program. The funding for Javits projects has had as its focus on populations of children and youth who are underrepresented in programs for gifted learners. LEAP was developed to include collaboration, identification, curriculum development and community/parent involvement. The project communities are impoverished, rural and isolated. Approximately 64% of the 7,000 residents in these communities are documented American Indians. Native American students represent 57% of total school enrollments. All four high school sites have a large enrollment of low income families (average; 53%) and limited English proficient students

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(62%). The target students identified for Project LEAP were not currently identified or served within programs for gifted students.

**Collaboration**

Participating districts are part of the formation of the Osage County Interlocal. Cooperative (OCIC) organized to effectively serve students in a cost efficient manner. An Educational Assistance Team implemented program instructional activities. The Team included a Project Director, three Resource Specialists, and three Educational Assistants. The Resource Specialists were itinerant, dividing their time among the target districts. The Educational Assistants were site-based.

In addition to the administrative linkages that existed among the high schools through the infrastructure of the cooperative, the linkages each member of the Educational Assistance Tem established with and between students, parents, communities, and other projects contributed to the success of Project LEAP. Exit interviews with staff, interviews with students and teachers, and on-site observations reveal strong bonds among project staff, students and others not receiving direct services from project staff. The boundaries that typically demarcate those students in the gifted program and those students not in the program were diminished in importance. Project staff held numerous special events, service learning projects and activities associated with curricular units that were invitational to all interested students. This was evident in all facets of Project LEAP. One example is the Career Fair that was held in October, 1997. Other events commonly held may be planned by a lead school, but supported by Project LEAP, Project REACT, a Title VII Bilingual Education Program, and the Title IX Indian Education Program. In additional to the project links, the communication links are apparent with other faculty members at each school, with families of students in all schools, and with all students at each site.

The outstanding characteristics of rural schools that contributed to the success of the project is the necessity for teachers, administrators and project staff to hold more than one position (Helge, 198 1; Putnam, 1986). Project staff would be able to work with many different students without having to delimit the type and nature of the work done with students. The authenticity of meeting individual needs was a priority.

**Identification**

The project served over 120 students in grades 9-12 in four rural high schools from separate school districts. Identification was by necessity an ongoing process for Project staff at all four schools. During the first month of each of the three project years, a large proportion of energy was invested in gathering identification data. Of the over 120 target students identified for project participation over three years (some participated all three years), about 60% of the students were Native American. Of the students served by Project LEAP, 87% were students who were never served by the traditional gifted programs at their school district. The screening and identification process was developed by project staff in collaboration with administration and teachers in the schools and includes a weighted matrix. The following criteria were included in the weighted matrix: Grade Point Average, Achievement Test Composite Score, Achievement Test Individual Sub Test Score, Nomination by Teacher, Nomination by Peer, Analysis of Student Survey, Student Product Analysis, and Identification Review Team Recommendation.

Although a numerical value was assigned to the criteria, a case study approach in which the evaluation of portfolios of student product was the final determination for project placement. After placement in the Project, students maintained their own portfolios to reflect student growth and progress throughout the project. Decisions about curriculum development, implementation, evaluation were determined based on the success of student participants. Each student in Project LEAP contributed to his

or her admissions portfolio data to exit the Project with academic documentation. As a strategy to promote continued interest in college, a Career Portfolio was developed to focus on educational goals and planning for the future. The Project staff continually monitored the portfolios and other indicators of student success to alter and modify program activities.

The authenticity of the identification process rests in the use of the student portfolio. Project evaluation data reveal that a process where quantitative recordings of data using only those data that could be obtained for all students was not the priority goal in implementing the identification system. Rather, collecting data that portrayed the strength of each student, soliciting information from alternative sources, such as people who knew the student outside of the school setting, and using information that required subjective evaluations from others took a precedence. It is important to note that equity and fairness was granted each student in a way that relied less upon relative standing in statistically normative terms than on identification of the individual needs of students.

**Curriculum**

Project LEAP provided students with individualized instruction and specially developed study units. The study units incorporated and encouraged growth in all phases of school life. The project curriculum consists of challenging content and performance standards in the core subjects designed to raise students' achievement. Academic support was provided to enhance leadership skills, establish high academic goals, improve evidence of achievement, and promote development of talent performance. The study units were focused in six areas: Pre-College Orientation; Career Education; Motivation and Self-Esteem; Cultural Heritage of the Indian Tribes of Osage County; Writing Skills, Prose and Poetry; and, Research Skills.

Project students demonstrated an overall increase in performance on the ACT/SAT scores. One reason for the overwhelming increasing was the dramatic increase in the number of students who were taking the ACT or SAT as a result of participation in Project LEAP. All Project LEAP students are encouraged to take the ACT, with greater numbers of 9th and 10th graders accepting the invitation. For example, whereas before Project LEAP no high school students took the PSAT, over three years of the project over 5 have taken the PSAT. Additionally, twice as many students are retaking the ACT to improve their scores after taking the preparation lessons within the Pre-College Orientation Unit. Scores are increasing with each subsequent retake.

Project sites show statistically significant increase in the number of students applying for college admittance. Nearly all students as seniors submitted applications to college. No student was denied acceptance to college; although some students have chosen other career paths. Project LEAP has provided extensive information about colleges and careers, particularly through the Career Fair that was developed and delivered each year to encourage college and career exploration for project students. In addition, the Pre-College Orientation Unit included visits to a university campus, guest speakers, Internet access to university information, and other valuable resources. Project staff worked closely with the school counselors, students and parents to provide assistance with college applications, financial aid and scholarship applications. Project sites increased the number of students who receive scholarships and financial aid. In any year, all of the seniors (100%) in the project applied for some degree of financial aid and/or scholarships.

Curriculum and lesson plans were developed to respond to student needs according to assessed strengths and interests. The six units of study are available for dissemination to other rural schools. Knowledge and achievement were documented through portfolio assessment and assessment rubrics were developed and are available from the Project Director. All unit guides have a specific focus to

utilize language and culture. The language and culture of the Native American tribes represented in the project is emphasized in all six study units.

**Community and Parent Involvement**

Important linkages in rural communities include relationships within the schools and outside of the school as well. Both linkages were well planned for Project LEAP. The within schools linkages included extensive Professional development of project and school-based staff.

For small schools in rural areas, close ties to the community and parents are important to foster. Project LEAP kept the community informed of the project through news releases, photos in local newspapers, community events, and student service learning projects. A strong parent education component was correlated with each of the study units with many parents getting involved in activities with the school for the first time. The project had as one of its goals to develop parental awareness, understanding and involvement with abilities and needs of their child by providing parents with information and educational assistance. One area that was innovative to typical school practices was the inclusion of knowledge of the options available for their child's future educational needs. By informing and involving parents, greater support for their children's educational progress was achieved.

The project distributed evaluation surveys to project parents that measured opinions regarding parent training sessions that were held in conjunction with the six curricular units. The surveys allowed recipients to rate the training on a scale from 0 to 5 (O=very poor, 1=poor, 2=adequate, 3=fair, 4=good, and 5=excellent). Tallied survey results indicated that the overall success of the project parent training was rated "good" to "excellent". Project staff designed a PowerPoint presentation of Project LEAP presented at the various Parent Orientation Meetings. Of the parents who participated, the response was overwhelmingly positive. Efforts must be consciously planned in order to encourage greater parent participation at the high school level.

***Conclusions***

Two essential components contributed to the success of Project LEAP: the authenticity in identification and the collaboration and linkages among and between the schools and community. Although an elaborate system of collecting, analyzing, and utilizing individual data was implemented, the value in providing unique pieces of data to demonstrate individual needs of students remained a priority. Students were afforded services based on demonstrated or potential need, rather than space in a restricted program. The portfolio contributed to documentation of need and allowed authentic assessment strategies to be continued in the curriculum.

The project was able to maintain continuity in its connections with school and community by retaining the superior quality of Project staff who valued the important linkages within, between and outside of the high school involved. Although some personnel changes were made throughout the project, continuity and qualifications remained high. Two of the three Resource Specialists had Master's Degrees, two were Native American, and all certified personnel had extensive experience with gifted and talented education. Two of the three Educational Assistants were college graduates and members of the Native American Tribes represented by many of the target students. The professional expertise of the project staff was a strong factor in the positive response to the program by students, parents, teachers and administrators at the four participating sites.

Another key factor is the inclusive interaction of all Project staff with other faculty and students at each high school. The nature of the small and rural school demands close interaction, essential

linkages, and collaboration for the success of all students, rather than the exclusive treatment of any one group of students. Project LEAP students and parents continue to participate in several school programs.

Another important factor is the communication linkages of Project LEAP with other programs within the target districts. The Osage County Interlocal Cooperative (OCIC), the administrative unit for Project LEAP in the schools has a unique administrative status in education. The OCIC serves as the coordinator for multiple programs within the districts and is able to integrate professional development, parental involvement, multicultural activities, acquisition of technology, technology training and many other aspects of education in a cost effective and collaborative manner.

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